

WORST POLLUTION

Alexandria ranks seventh in state in toxic air emissions

By DREW BUSH
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Emissions from a privately owned power plant in Alexandria have landed the city on a top 10 list its officials would rather avoid: Most toxic pollutants released into Virginia's air.

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality on Wednesday released 2002 statistics listing Alexandria as the locality with the seventh highest toxic air emissions in the commonwealth. Most came from the Potomac River Generating Station at 1400 North Royal St., owned and operated by Atlanta-based power-provider Mirant Corp, according to the report.

Mirant spokesman Steven Arabia argued the plant complies with air quality regulations. Shutting it down, he said, would not provide "an appreciable difference in air quality in the D.C. region," which has been listed by the Environmental Protection Agency as an air quality non-attainment area.

"We understand that because the city has grown up around us, we are a focus," Arabia said. "But by and large we try to do what we can to try to minimize our impacts. We comply with all the laws and go beyond."

Arabia said that Mirant has lowered ozone causing emissions from the Potomac plant by 30 percent and will lower it another 30 percent by summer 2005.

The Mirant facility released more than 2.7 million pounds of toxic pollutants into the air in 2002, according to the DEQ report.

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Alexandria among most polluted areas

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What effect, if any, Mirant emissions might have on city residents' health has yet to be nailed down. But two studies, one from Penn State University and the other from the DEQ, have found that larger particles are escaping the plant's boundaries and settling in surrounding neighborhoods.

Citing a series of emissions-related studies, Alexandria City Manager Phillip Sunderland noted in a

Nov. 2003 memo that long-term exposure to "fine" particles can adversely affect a person's health even if the

amount of emissions meets federal standards.

The Sierra Club, meanwhile, claims Mirant plant toxic releases can lead to serious vascular and

respiratory illnesses.

"The [Potomac plant] is basically operating with no pollution controls," said Pamela Irwin, air campaign coordinator for the environmental group.

The Alexandria City Council hosted a work session Wednesday to discuss emissions issues.

Public comment on this issue will be accepted during a hearing at 7:30 p.m. April 12 at the Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson Street.

The Top 10

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality released its 2002 list of Virginia communities with the most toxic air emissions. Below are the top 10 localities followed by the pounds of pollutants emitted in 2002.

1. Hopewell: 6,745,800 lbs
2. Chesterfield: 6,694,788 lbs
3. Allegheny: 4,476,599 lbs
4. Isle of Wight: 3,294,791 lbs
5. Giles: 3,235,321 lbs
6. Chesapeake: 2,983,045 lbs
7. Alexandria: 2,764,927 lbs
8. Russell: 2,685,024 lbs
9. Henrico: 2,491,164 lbs
10. King William: 1,907,706 lbs

Source: Virginia DEQ

The Potomac River Generating Station in Alexandria is among the worst in Virginia for releasing toxic pollutants into the air, according to a state Department of Environmental Quality list.

Mark Young/Journal